

Boko Haram – Terrorism against the leadership in Nigeria

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On the night of 14th April 2014 Boko Haram kidnapped 276 female students from a secondary school in Chibok, a town with a Christian majority in Nigeria. 57 of the schoolgirls managed to escape over the next few months. The abduction triggered global social media campaign called #BeingBackOurGirls, in which even first lady Michelle Obama and Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai are involved (Narayan, 2016). In October 2016, 21 girls were freed after negotiations between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government occurred with the help of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Swiss government (BBC, 2016). In November, the Nigerian army found another girl who was carrying a 10-month-old son (Narayana, 2016). However, approximately 196 of these girls are still missing. The Nigerian government indicated it was negotiating the release of about 83 more girls (Narayana, 2016). The rest of them are supposedly either dead; married to Boko Haram fighters; or have converted to Islam and consequently have no intention to return.

Boko Haram (meaning ‘Western education is forbidden’ in Hausa) is an Islamic extremist militant group based in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria that is supposedly in alliance with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (BBC, 2015b). Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, possessing the greatest economy and largest oil production on the continent - but the majority of the population still lives in poverty, with about 60% of the population living on less than a \$1 (£0.80) a day (BBC, 2012). Additionally, there has been an immense economic divide between the oil-rich south and impoverished north and a demographic boom that has left many youths unemployed (World Policy Journal, 2012: 16). This extreme social inequality has contributed to the uprising of Boko Haram (Adesoji, 2010: 97-99). The group rejects Western education, Western culture, and modern science. It seeks to abolish the secular system of governance and impose Sharia law to every Nigerian state (beyond the 12 states already accepting it). Some northern politicians and businessmen reportedly support the group financially, but it mainly funds its operation using criminal activities, such as bank robbery, stealing guns from the authorities, and ransoms (World Policy Journal, 2012: 17). Amnesty International (2016) says about 2,000 children have been abducted by Boko Haram since 2014, and many of them are used as sex slaves, fighters and even suicide bombers.

Since the Chibok girls were captured, Nigeria has had two Presidents: Goodluck Jonathan was in power until May 2015, and subsequently Muhammadu Buhari has been in office since then. Jonathan and his government were criticised by the Nigerian public for not demonstrating a strong enough commitment to free the girls, and similarly due to their continued failure to defeat Boko Haram (The Economist, 2014). The abduction resulted in a great media attention beyond the borders of Nigeria, and Jonathan was labelled as ‘incompetent’ and ‘callous’. *The Economist* (2014) also claimed that Jonathan’s supposed corruption was one of the main reasons that his government was unable to fight the terrorist group. In response to the protests, Jonathan motioned that his government would release imprisoned Boko Haram members in exchange for the captured girls. Discussions then took place

with France, Britain, the United States and Israel, whereby he agreed no deals should be arranged with the terrorists, so he called off the exchange at the last minute in May 2014. This U-turn enraged Boko Haram leaders, arguably putting the girls' lives in even more danger. Allegedly Jonathan lost the elections in May 2015 due to his corrupt governance and inability to fight Boko Haram (The Economist, 2016). The new president, Muhhamadu Buhari, had previously served as the Head of State from 1983 to 1985, after overthrowing the then democratically elected government. During his current tenure, Buhari started negotiations with Boko Haram over the Chibok girls (BBC: 2015a). Subsequently, after 21 girls were freed, the Nigerian authorities denied that Boko Haram fighters were freed in return for the girls. However a security official told the BBC that four commanders had been freed, and ransom was paid by the Swiss government on behalf of the Nigerians (BBC, 2016). In either case, President Buhari certainly has achieved more than his predecessor, however, the methods used to do so are somewhat questionable. Overall it seems that a transparent and accountable government will hold the key to defeating Boko Haram.

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